



Seasonal Digestive Health – Help for the Holidays

By RoseMarie Pierce B.Sc.Pharm, Holistic Pharmacist

Enzymes support proper digestion – but do we have enough to do the job? They are instrumental in helping to break down and utilize the nutrients from fats, carbs, proteins, sugars and fibres in order to produce energy for the body. While enzymes are found in raw food, there are only enough to digest that particular food and many of us do not eat sufficient quantities of raw food for it to be significant. Eating a meal that contains mostly cooked or processed food can provide very little to no enzymes. The cooking and processing of foods at a temperature of 115° F (46°C) or above destroys the naturally-occurring enzymes found in raw food and reduces a significant amount of the food's nutritional value. In order to compensate for the lack of enzymes from the food itself, our bodies must produce the majority of the digestive enzymes required to properly digest a meal.

Can the Body Produce Enough Enzymes?

Digestion begins in the mouth, continues in the stomach, and is completed in the intestines. Digestive enzymes are secreted along the digestive tract by the pancreas, the liver/gallbladder, the salivary glands, the cells lining the stomach, and by the lining of the small and large intestines. Unfortunately, the body has a limited supply of energy and raw materials designated to make enzymes. With largely cooked meals and the festive baked treats during the holiday, the body has to work overtime to meet the demands of digestion. This is probably the most noticeable period of time for digestive issues caused by an overly-taxed digestive system without enough enzymes.

Bloating and Gas – Not a Pretty Picture!

Without adequate enzymes available to the body at meal time; protein putrefies, fat turns rancid, carbohydrates ferment, and the fibre in fruits and vegetables does not properly release trapped vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients for absorption. The result is a heavy feeling in the stomach, gas, cramps, bloating and either constipation, diarrhea or both. These symptoms indicate inadequate enzyme production by the digestive system and improper nutrient absorption. The body normally produces 1.5 litres of gas per day, but production can go as high as 10 litres if just half a small muffin is left in the small intestines undigested. The carbohydrates in that muffin will be fermented by unhealthy, putrefying bacteria producing large amounts of hydrogen gas that will either cause bloating and severe abdominal distention and/or rolling gas. The rolling gas expels from the body without producing an odour yet may cause loud embarrassing sounds.

Why Holiday Food can Make us Sick

1. Holiday meals tend to be eaten in large amounts. The more food you cram into your stomach, especially carbohydrates, sugars, fructose and lactose, the more gas is produced. This gas creates pressure on the esophageal sphincter (the muscle that closes off the top of the stomach & keeps digested food down where it belongs) by pushing the stomach up. When the pressure is great enough, food and acid will back up, causing heartburn. Carbohydrate-digesting enzymes along with the lactose-digesting enzyme lactase (Lactaid) can aid in breaking down the complex starches and sugar, helping to prevent discomfort from bloating and gas.
2. Holiday foods are generally high in dairy, fat, and alcohol which can cause liver congestion, and weight gain. Liver congestion can produce a heavy feeling in the stomach and often nausea upon awakening. Also, fatty foods slow down digestion and can trigger reflux. The fat-digesting enzyme lipase supports the liver in its ability to break down fats.

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3. Most holiday treats contain hard-to-digest proteins such as the dairy proteins and the gluten proteins found in wheat, barley and rye. When proteins are not properly broken down into amino acids, they tend to form a paste in the bowel causing constipation. Or they irritate the lining of the intestines, causing a flushing action that often leads to diarrhea. Protease or protein-digesting enzymes can help to break down most proteins, especially the turkey, ham or most meat-based protein. However, special protein-digesting enzymes are needed for foods containing gluten and dairy. Both Peptidase DPP IV (a special type of protease), and Kiwi extracts with standardized protease enzyme content, are known to be effective for breaking down dairy and gluten proteins and relieving constipation and symptoms of IBS.
4. Holiday foods are usually low in fibre. Fibre tends to be missing from the holiday dinner table. Low-fibre foods tend to aggravate constipation and do not provide the right environment for healthy intestinal bacteria to flourish. Even if we add a salad or some cooked vegetable to the meal, poor chewing habits and drinking fluids with meals prevents the fibre and other nutrients in the produce from being properly broken down and utilized to the maximum. Enzyme supplements can provide fibre-digesting enzymes to help.
5. Holiday stress triggered by mall shopping, cooking, cleaning, travel, and family visits can cause upset stomach and heartburn. During stress, and the flight or fight responses, enzyme production is significantly decreased. On top of that, many people cope with stress by overeating and drinking too much.

Improve Your Digestion with Enzymes

Excessive eating can overwhelm the body's ability to produce sufficient enzymes, but it is possible to improve digestion by adding an all-purpose digestive enzyme supplement at the beginning of a meal. This is very valuable as it will help to conserve the body's own enzyme supply and decrease the amount of energy the body expends during the process of digestion. When choosing a supplemental enzyme formula, look for one that incorporates a variety of plant-based enzymes to ensure complete and proper digestion. Plant-based enzymes are more active, versatile and effective throughout the entire digestive tract. They can perform their enzymatic activity across a wider range of acidity and alkalinity within the body. Another aspect of an effective, all-purpose digestive enzyme is the ability to digest fibre. The body does not make the cellulase and other fibre-digesting enzymes necessary for proper breakdown of fibre, so it must be introduced through the raw foods we eat or added to an enzyme supplement, such as FibraZyme. FibraZyme is a fibre-digesting enzyme combination that will break down the fibrous cell walls present in grains, fruits and vegetables and increase the availability of vitamins and minerals from fruits and vegetables.

Enzyme Supplementation Helps More than Digestion

Adding enzymes to the holiday meals and even when having desserts will help to digest food more efficiently hence improving digestion, elimination & bowel health as well as reducing the risk of heartburn, gas and bloating. Plus, an effective digestive enzyme is also ideal for those suffering from other health issues which often are more pronounced during the holidays such as, stiff muscles and back pain, low energy, allergies as well as colds and flu.

Supplementing with a plant-based digestive enzyme helps the body do its job much more effectively. For the large turkey dinner with all the trimmings, take 1 or 2 capsules before the meal, along with 1 or 2 with dessert depending on how much you eat. You will be amazed at how awake and good you feel afterwards!

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